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Summary record of the 12th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 20 October 2008, at 4.50 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. Argüello (Chairman) ..... (Argentina)
later: Mr. Elsherbini (Vice-Chairman) ..... (Egypt)

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The meeting was called to order at 4.50 p.m.

Agenda item 32: Questions relating to information (A/63/21 and 258)

1. **Mr. Hosseini** (Islamic Republic of Iran), speaking in his capacity as Rapporteur of the Committee on Information, introduced the report of that Committee (A/63/21), which provided information on the Committee's activities and recommendations in the form of draft resolutions. With the appointment of Antigua and Barbuda and Zambia, the Committee on Information would have a total of 112 members.

2. During the general debate at the 2008 session, members had emphasized the central role of the United Nations in global affairs and of the Department of Public Information as its public voice. They had also acknowledged the vital role of the Committee on Information and its cooperation with the Department. The need for parity among the official languages had been emphasized and the Department had been urged to strengthen United Nations information centres and ensure that any decision to rationalize was made in consultation with host countries, with due regard for geographical, linguistic and technological specificities. The importance of closer cooperation between the Department of Public Information, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Department of Field Support had been underlined and the Department of Public Information had been urged to highlight peacekeeping success stories from a national angle. Speakers had, moreover, referred to the importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, requesting the Department to play a more vigorous role in promoting the dialogue among civilizations. The Department's outreach programme had also been praised. In addition, the report referred to the plan for the *UN Chronicle* to evolve into a journal entitled *UN Affairs*. A pilot copy had recently been made available for consideration.

3. **Mr. Cruau** (France), speaking on behalf of the European Union; the candidate countries, Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey; the stabilization and association process countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro; and, in addition, Armenia, Georgia, Liechtenstein, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, reiterated the importance of strategic reports that provided a clear assessment of results, set out difficulties encountered and proposed a range of solutions. The reports under consideration were testimony to efforts made in that regard.

4. At the 2008 session of the Committee on Information, the European Union had identified three priorities: the need to enhance the effectiveness of the Department within a limited budget; make additional efforts towards multilingualism; and simplify the resolution. Notable progress had been made on all three fronts, thanks to the flexibility shown by delegations. The European Union would spare no efforts in helping the Department to further improve its efficiency, especially with regard to the network of United Nations information centres. The Regional Information Centre in Brussels could serve as a model in that regard. Much remained to be done to practically implement multilingualism and ensure that the message of the United Nations was disseminated in at least all six official languages.

5. In times of crises, it was all the more necessary for the Organization to strengthen its political influence, develop partnerships with civil society, and participate more actively in the international exchange of ideas. The transformation of the *UN Chronicle* into a genuinely thought-provoking *UN Affairs* journal would be an important tool to that end.

6. Draft resolution A (A/63/21, chapter IV) of the Committee on Information *reaffirmed* the commitment of the international community to the principles of freedom of the press and of information, as well as to those of the independence, pluralism, diversity of the media and *urged* all States to ensure for journalists the free and effective performance of their professional tasks. Unfortunately, however, the death toll for journalists remained high and the international community had a collective responsibility to put a stop to the killings.

7. *Mr. Elsherbini (Egypt) Vice-Chairman took the Chair.*

8. **Mr. Blair** (Antigua and Barbuda), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, underscored the importance of providing accurate, impartial, comprehensive and timely information on the work of the United Nations to Member States and the wider international community. The Department of Public Information, the public voice of the Organization, and any other entity providing information on the United Nations, must ensure that a consistent message was delivered.

9. The Group of 77 and China had taken note of the pilot copy of the new *UN Affairs* journal, but had fundamental concerns regarding multilingualism, content and editorial policy, as well as the diversity and extent of its potential audience. The Group held dearly the concept of parity of languages and believed that any new publication emanating from or within the United Nations should encompass all six official languages. If permitted to go forward, *UN Affairs* should be initiated, and continued, in all six languages. The Department of Public Information should also consider strengthening editorial policy and provide Member States with more opportunities to make comments and suggestions. Although greater appeal to academia was needed, the core readership of *UN Chronicle* should also be maintained. Additional efforts were needed to ensure that any new policy orientations concerning United Nations publications guaranteed an acceptable growth in their core readership. The Secretariat should, as a matter of priority, report back on new editorial policies that took account of such issues. Until a final decision was taken by Member States regarding *UN Affairs*, the Group of 77 and China requested that production of *UN Chronicle* should be resumed.

10. **Ms. Sinthusen** (Thailand), speaking on behalf of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) said that the gap in information access between developed and developing countries — as well as within developing countries — continued to widen, with the situation further exacerbated by uneven information quality and deliberate attempts to mislead the public. The role of the Department had become all the more important in that context. It should give priority to ensuring accuracy, credibility and availability of information on the work of the United Nations; engaging a diversity of stakeholders on issues of common concern; and dispelling misunderstandings and preconceived notions that polarized people. Information and communications technology (ICT) had the potential to create new opportunities for economic growth and social development in support of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It could also, however, widen disparities. Dissemination of information should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a means to help people reach more informed decisions. Disadvantaged and marginalized groups, for their part, should be made aware of issues of global concern, informed of their rights and empowered to improve their lives. That required the development and strengthening of information infrastructure, particularly in developing countries.

11. ASEAN commended the Department for its role in mobilizing global support for United Nations activities. Some barriers to successful programme implementation had been lifted, thanks in part to improved public awareness. There was a serious need, however, to foster understanding among peoples espousing different ideologies. Misuse of ICT, in the name of freedom of expression, could breed resentment and hostility, which undermined respect for the beliefs and rights of others. ASEAN looked forward to a greater role for the Department in efforts to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue and welcomed its initiatives to promote international values and respect for diversity, including through the Alliance of Civilizations.

12. Radio remained the most accessible and affordable media for vast sectors of the population in many developing countries, particularly in remote areas or for people lacking access to formal education. Use of traditional media should therefore continue to be promoted. ASEAN welcomed the Department's optimal use of different types of client-oriented media and its efforts to ensure multilingualism. There was, however, a need to recruit local staff to ensure that publications and information programmes were tailored to local needs and cultures, to include translation into local languages where possible.

13. ASEAN was home to four United Nations information centres and noted the Department's collaboration with other information centres around the world and with United Nations organs. It wished to encourage improved networking with civil society and local and international media in order to reinforce outreach and channel voices from the field back to Headquarters. Efforts to rationalize the work of the information centres should also be encouraged, as should closer cooperation between information centres and consultation with host countries.

14. Speaking in her national capacity, she reaffirmed Thailand's commitment to supporting the work of the United Nations in the field of information. To raise awareness of the United Nations among young people, Thai students had been recruited to participate in meetings of the General Assembly and Youth Forum.

15. **Ms. Rodríguez** (Mexico), speaking on behalf of the Rio Group, welcomed the report of the Secretary-

General on the activities of the Department of Public Information in the first half of 2008 (A/63/258). It was particularly important to disseminate information on such topics as the maintenance of international peace and security; protection and promotion of human rights; achieving the MDGs; mitigating climate change; and prevention of HIV/AIDS. Closer cooperation between the Department and other United Nations entities, including the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Department of Field Support and the Peacebuilding Support Office was needed in order to facilitate a broader and more accurate portrayal of the work of the Organization among the public, particularly with regard to peacekeeping and peacebuilding activities. She encouraged the Department to continue supporting the laudable work of United Nations information centres throughout the world and to continue disseminating information in as many languages as possible — including indigenous languages and Portuguese — using traditional mass media, such as radio, television and the press, since they remained the main sources of information in developing countries. The laudable efforts to provide access to the United Nations website to persons with disabilities should also be pursued.

16. Achieving parity among the six official and working United Nations languages was vital. In that connection, multilingualism should be promoted in order to put into practice the Organization's universal calling. Multilingualism was not to be assessed in terms of the number of documents translated, nor could it be addressed solely through increases in budget allocations. Rather, the goal should be to optimize the information structure within the Organization.

17. In the Secretary-General's report, the Secretariat had attempted to address the concerns raised by Member States. Information was provided on issues to which the Rio Group attached particular importance, such as cooperation between relevant departments to create policy and best practices for United Nations radio stations in peacekeeping operations and progress achieved in ending sexual exploitation and abuse by United Nations peacekeeping personnel by means of public information materials and press briefings. Positive developments highlighted in the report included the provision of computers to 26 information centres in developing countries as well as efforts to publish a revised version of *The United Nations Today*, in Spanish.

18. While the Rio Group was pleased to note the inclusion of contributions from regional representatives, including Brazilian President Luiz Ignacio Lula Da Silva, in the pilot edition of *UN Affairs*, it had fundamental concerns as to the added value of such a publication and its ability to compete with academic publications. While new information and communications technologies made it possible to reach a broad range of audiences, many in developing countries did not yet have access to those technologies. Consequently, the Department must undertake efforts to raise awareness of the potential benefits of access to the Internet and ICT and of ways to bridge the digital divide.

19. **Mr. Ali** (Malaysia), speaking on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, said that discriminatory and distorted coverage of events in developing countries continued unabated, putting the vast majority of mankind at a disadvantage and requiring urgent redress. The Non-Aligned Movement called for the responsible use of information as well as respect for existing codes of conduct and professional ethics. All forms of media were important, with ICT playing a supportive role. The growing digital divide between developed and developing countries was, however, a matter of serious concern. Universal, inclusive and non-discriminatory access to ICT should be strengthened in support of national efforts, in order to facilitate the genuine involvement of developing countries in the information society and knowledge economy. All States should ensure that the information society was founded on — and stimulated — respect for cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, as well as ethnical values.

20. ICT should be used to promote the MDGs, inter alia, by developing a global partnership for development. In order to fully harness ICT in developing countries, it was essential to eradicate the poverty, illiteracy and exclusion that prevented full participation. ASEAN wished to reaffirm its common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society. Despite a long history of struggle, the objectives of the New World Information and Communication Order had yet to be realised. Continued imbalances in the information field had serious consequences for developing countries and should be combated through relevant agencies such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Internet governance, carried out according to the Geneva principles, constituted a core issue of the Information Society agenda and all Governments should have an equal role and responsibility for international Internet governance. The Secretary-General should initiate enhanced cooperation to that end, and as a matter of urgency.

21. Speaking in his national capacity, he called on Member States to redouble their efforts towards eliminating the digital divide, as well as imbalances in information dissemination. Malaysia remained committed to that endeavour, as evidenced by its continued support for the NAM News Network (NNN).

22. *Mr. Argüello (Argentina) resumed the Chair.*

23. **Mr. Berrah** (Algeria) said that his delegation had taken note of the Department's accomplishments, including improving its services and sending a credible message that reflected the various activities of the United Nations. Narrowing the information gap between developed and developing countries and establishing a more equitable global information system would enhance the efficiency of the Department; to that end, it should strengthen national capacities and modernize information facilities.

24. He commended the Department for devoting the pilot edition of *UN Affairs* to coverage of the global food crisis; however, the new publication had some shortcomings which could be overcome by simplifying its content in order to render it more accessible to all sectors of society, and ensuring that it was available in the six official languages of the United Nations. Furthermore, in keeping with the principle of multilingualism, the quality of Arabic-language media materials, websites, radio and television programmes produced by the United Nations should be improved. In that regard, establishing partnerships with translation institutes throughout the world, such as the Algiers-based Arab League Translation Institute, might be of added benefit.

25. The Department should expand the breadth and quality of its coverage of such priority areas as United Nations reform. Enhanced coordination with United Nations information centres worldwide would improve local communities' grasp of the Organization's activities, in addition to facilitating the exchange of views and experiences between Headquarters and information centres. Despite advances in communications technology, the Secretariat should accord due attention to the print media, since many throughout the world, particularly in the developing countries, still depended on the printed word for information about the United Nations.

26. Since 2008 marked both the sixtieth anniversary of the first United Nations peacekeeping operation and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Department should seize the opportunity to issue a statement that clearly emphasized the need to unify and redouble efforts to promote peace and enhance respect for human rights. He was concerned, however, at the absence of any reference in the Secretary-General's report to activities undertaken by the Department to raise awareness about the heroic struggle being waged by the defenceless and peace-loving Palestinian people, on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the Palestinian Nakba. Nor was there any reference to the ongoing violations of their inalienable rights in contravention of international law and the Charter of the United Nations. His Government was eager to cooperate with the Department in disseminating a message that reflected the collective effort to implement the objectives of the Charter of the United Nations.

27. **Mr. Al Saedi** (United Arab Emirates) said that it was the international community's responsibility to provide the hundreds of thousands of people who had been marginalized as a result of the widening digital divide between developed and developing countries with the necessary resources to facilitate their access to modern technology. An international code of ethics should be developed that would help to establish appropriate legal and moral standards and ensure impartiality, transparency and credibility in the transfer and use of information and in ensuring respect for human rights and religious beliefs. He expressed regret over the persistence of inflammatory actions against certain religions and their value systems and emphasized the importance of protecting journalists, particularly in areas of armed conflict.

28. Human, financial and technical resources must be allocated in order to strengthen the role of the Department of Public Information in disseminating information on the goals and purposes of the United Nations. Special attention should be given to Arabic language services, in order to bring them up to the same standard as the services provided in the five other official languages. The Department and other United

Nations departments and institutions needed to address such current international issues as climate change, organized crime and terrorism, the question of Palestine and the situation in the Middle East in an impartial and transparent manner. In that connection, the Department should develop programmes that exposed the suffering of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation.

29. His Government had introduced legislation guaranteeing objective and balanced information and freedom of expression on various issues. It had also made provision for modern information and media facilities in its educational and development plans. Activities to promote responsible and free media included the establishment of the Abu Dhabi Free Zones and Dubai Media City, which hosted various satellite channels. The United Arab Emirates had also concluded bilateral agreements with some United Nations entities with a view to supporting the exchange of expertise and keeping pace with current international developments. He called for strengthened cooperation between the Department and other United Nations entities in order to promote a culture of peace and dialogue among civilizations.

The meeting rose at 5.56 p.m.